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ABSTRACT

This paper is an ethnographic study of African American male students at an urban high school and an examination of the quality of education received by those students. The study population was composed of 115 African American males in the high school class of 1989 observed from January, 1987, through the December following their expected graduation date in 1989. The study used qualitative research strategies including participant observation; in-depth and semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, staff, and community residents; analytical memoranda; an analysis of official and unofficial documents; and an analysis of field notes. The study explored the status of African American males in Michigan, the history of the urban high school studied, teacher student relationships, parent school relations, career planning, testing issues, student insights and skepticism, academic outcomes, peer pressure and materialism, and the drug subculture. Data suggest that educational outcomes had declined dramatically in the past two decades, relationships between students and teachers were highly formal and distant, parents and teachers were detached from the life of the school, and the culture of the teenagers, particularly the drug subculture, had assumed ascendancy. Included are 19 references. (JB)

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ALL DRESSED UP WITH NO PLACE TO GO:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS
IN AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

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I received a telephone call from the associate superintendent informing me of my appointment as the assistant principal at Metropolitan High School effective fall, 1986. I was thrilled about the opportunity to work in a school district which had a national reputation for academic excellence dating back to the mid-1960s.

As a native Michigander who left the state in 1970, I remembered only these facts about Metropolitan City, its affluence, Jewish culture and reputable public schools. I was shocked when the senior class arrived for registration on the first day of the school. Eight out of 10 students were African American, 1 out of 10 was Iraqi, and no more than 20 were identifiably Jewish or Caucasian.

I wandered about the building and grounds on those first days and tried to grasp as much about my new position as possible, especially the dynamics of the social setting. I was especially curious about the relationships between the teachers and students, parents and the school, and the peer relations among the African Americans males.

I immediately questioned how it could be that so many African Americans had relocated to Metropolitan City, and I wondered about my role expectation as an African American administrator. The answer was indisputable. It became evident that I was expected to be a positive role model for those students who were academically underperforming and a 'strong' disciplinarian for the students, largely African American and male, who were "acting-out," that is, displaying aggressive, violent or disruptive behaviors.

I observed that 97% of the teachers were Caucasian and advanced in years. In fact, the majority had strong Jewish cultural and religious ties with the City. They were typically former residents of city and had sent their own

children to Metropolitan High School during its heyday in the late 1960s. They moved out of the community after their own homes were paid for and their own children graduated from the high school. The new residents of the city, the working-class African Americans and Iraqis, had actually purchased their homes from these teachers and the teachers' neighbors and friends.

The other assistant principal was also an African American male. On one of those first days of the school year, he handed me the discipline files and forms from the previous year and informed me that discipline would be my primary responsibility as the new assistant principal. He meant that the majority of my time would be spent suspending and readmitting African American male students and mediating disputes between these students and their teachers.

I met the eight members of the security staff who were African Americans as well. I was told that these persons were responsible for securing the building during school hours, breaking up fights, and making sure the halls were cleared of students during class time. There were several serious incidents involving violent and aggressive behavior during the first month of school, especially during Homecoming Weekend, when there were several assaults and fights between groups of African American and Iraqi students. The security staff was instrumental addressing these incidents.

The school was in disrepair. But the two student parking lots were oversubscribed with cars, many of which were rather expensive, specialty cars and jeeps in the $30,000 and higher price range. Inside, a number of loud and unruly African American males paraded about the building wearing heavy, solid gold chains around their necks, jogging suits valued between $300 and $500, and gym shoes costing as much as $250. On the first day, one of these

students called me a "Black bastard" when I verbally corrected him for cutting the registration line.

The City is only approximately 3 square miles and flanks a large, predominantly African American, industrial city in the Midwestern section of the country. Metropolitan City was perfectly situated to support the flight of upwardly mobile out of the inner city seeking improved housing, lower crime rates, and better schools: first the Jewish, followed by the African Americans and, ultimately, the Iraqis. African Americans in Michigan generally have followed the migration patterns of Jews for at least eight decades (Stevenson, 1988).

The majority of these African American males lived within walking distance from the school in Metropolitan City. They generally represented lower-middle income households and lived with one parent, usually a working mother. Another smaller group was significantly poorer, resided in an low socio-economic township, and were bussed to school.

I learned within a few days that there were several different social groups of African American males attending Metropolitan High School. One group was clearly associated with the school's notorious drug subculture. Members apparently rejected notions of formal schooling, preferring street life over an academic career. Another group was extremely interested in education but nevertheless experienced limited academic success at Metropolitan High. They took a college preparatory program but could not score well on the college entrance examinations. The better athletes, another social group, were terribly troubled about their likelihood of gaining acceptance at the college and university of their choice.

No, this was clearly not the affluent Jewish community I remembered from

my high school days in the 1960s. I came to understand, within a short time, that most of these African American males, both the so-called troublemakers and the academically-inclined, were ill-prepared for college and possessed few marketable skills upon leaving Metropolitan High. From their teachers' accounts, these students were unaware of the importance of education and the role of schooling. I wanted to know their stories and hear their accounts of schooling at Metropolitan High. What I discovered was that the problems facing these students were dynamic, involving changes in the culture of the school, the disposition of the teachers and parents, peer pressure, and the impact of the school's drug culture.

This is paper describes an examination of the quality of education received by 115 African American males in the class of 1989. The central question was how effective was the school in carrying out its mission, "To ensure quality learning for all students through effective teaching in a caring environment?"

METHOD

My research centered on a group of 115 African American males who were members of the graduating class of 1989 at Metropolitan High School in the winter of 1987. I followed these students over a three year period beginning in January, 1987, the middle of their sophomore year of high school through the December following their expected June graduation date in 1989. My research made use of the traditional qualitative research strategies. Included among these strategies were participant observation (Erikson, 1973 and 1985); in-depth and semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, staff and community residents; analytical memoranda (Glasser & Strauss, 1967); an analysis of official and unofficial documents (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982); and an analysis of field notes.

I was a true participant observer in that I was employed by the district as an assistant principal and involved professionally and personally with the students and the faculty. As a concerned African American man, I frequently attended African American-sponsored activities in the community, and I was a frequent quest at Jewish religious, cultural, and social activities. The fact that numerous individuals, both African American and Jewish, read and confirmed these outcomes as valid was specially significant for me as the researcher[1].

I considered my rapport with the African American males and various teachers and members of the community to have contributed positively to my understanding of the social setting. Seven males served as key informants, providing clarification and descriptions of specific events (Denzin, 1978). At one point, several of these students even assisted in the development of a

working vocabulary list of terms commonly associated with the drug culture in the school, e.g. dime, gettin' paid, rollin', eight ball, flippin', etc. Much would have been lost had I not had the assistance of these students.

All names and other explicit details which, if used, could disclose the identity of the school, the school district, the students, and other persons associated with this story were altered or deleted in an effort to maintain anonymity[1].

THE STATUS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN MICHIGAN

African American males in the state of Michigan, where this research was conducted, mirror or fare worse than other African American males nationwide. African American male Michiganders are disproportionately over-represented in the prison population, the population of AIDS victims, and the population in juvenile detention. They are disproportionately under-represented in the college and university populations of the state (as shown in Table 1).

Although the unemployment rate is appallingly high for African American males in the state of Michigan, the county in which Metropolitan High is located is considered to be one of the states' brighter area of economic recovery due to the large number of high tech businesses emerging there. As this story will reveal, most African American males who graduated were unprepared to fill any of the new positions in their county.

Table 1 Statistics on African American Males in Michigan

1.	Number in public colleges	8,393
	Percent of public college enrollment (fall, 1988 data)	3.8%
2.	Number in public universities	6,257
	Percent of total public universities	2.5%
3.	Number reported with AIDS since 1981	436
	Percent of all reported AIDS cases in Michigan	39%
4.	Number on General Assistance	31,065
	Percent of all DSS General Assistance (May, 1989)	32%
5.	Number unemployed in Michigan	45,000
	Percent of unemployed (May, 1989)	17.7%
6.	Number in prison	15,307
	Percent of the prison population (annual report)	58.2%
7.	Number in juvenile detention centers	151
	Percent of juvenile detention population (May, 1989)	58.1%
8.	Number in juvenile training schools	328
	Percent of the juvenile training school population (May, 1989)	58.5%
9.	Number in foster care	430
	Percent of foster care population (May, 1989)	67%

Note. From The Michigan Chronicle "Black Male in Crisis," March 28, 1990

METROPOLITAN HIGH 1970 - 1990

I began this examination of the quality of education for African American males by reviewing the changes that occurred at Metropolitan High School between 1970 and 1990 and by assessing how these changes altered the educational environment of the school. Metropolitan High School was built with all the amenities of an upper socio-economic community of the late 1950s to serve a "known" population. The administrators who designed the school actually designed a school for their own children, complete with a radio station, planetarium, television station, theater, and deep diving and Olympic-sized swimming pools.

There were slightly more than 100 African American students attending Metropolitan High School in the very early 1970s. This was slightly less than 9 percent of the total student body. These 100 African Americans did not actually reside within the city limits, but rather lived in a lower socio-economic township approximately two miles away which was included in the school's attendance area.

African Americans began moving directly into Metropolitan City during the mid-1970s. The district lost an average of 90 Caucasian students each year between 1970 and 1990, while it gained approximately the same number of African American students each year. Conversations with adults, both African American and Caucasian, confirmed that the Caucasian residents moved out of the district as a result of their improved socio-economic status, concern for the declining quality of education, and fear of student racial unrest at school. The most obvious change, the racial make-up of the school, was clear to teachers, parents, and students alike.

Although small in number in 1970, the African American students expressed

their anger over conditions of discrimination and alienation at Metropolitan High School. The students staged a walk-out and demanded social and curricular changes which would acknowledge African American history and culture. Specifically, they demanded representation on the all elected student organizations, a series of courses in African American studies, Black History Month activities, and the hiring of African American teachers.

The students were granted their demands by the school's administration. In return for these concessions, however, they were required to sign an agreement with the principal "to conduct themselves in an exemplary manner and to abide by all the rules, regulations, and policies of the school." The principal, in his remarks to the student body at an assembly conducted to discuss the walk-out and the agreements reached, concluded with the following statement:

> But I would also say that we have a great school that turns out great scholars and students who achieve and succeed in the colleges and universities and in the vocations of their choices to a greater degree than other schools. This is a tribute to a fine student body and to one of the finest staff of teachers I have ever worked with.

The student walk-out was followed by riots which included racial violence in both 1970 and 1974. Several Caucasian students were assaulted. The riots resulted in local School Board discipline hearings which were emotional, and well publicized. The Michigan State Board of Education sent representatives from Lansing to monitor the discipline hearings to assure that the decisions reached were unbiased. Several African American males were expelled, and many others were placed on long-term suspension as a result of these hearings.

The history of African American males at Metropolitan High School was marred by social issues of alienation, political impotence, and resistance. This historical racial tension had a negative impact on the delivery of

educational services. The unrest of the 1970s was never forgotten. I interviewed 10 African American males in 1989 who volunteered that they were related to some of the students who participated in the walk-out and race riots in the 1970s. Others were keenly aware and affected by the history of racial unrest at Metropolitan High. This knowledge evolved and shaped African American males' attitudes about the school, staff, and community. I examined changes in relations between the teachers and students, parents and the school, and peer relations among the African American males.

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

One obvious change, which occurred during the twenty-year period, was in the texture of the relationship between teacher and student. The Metropolitan High School community of the early 1970s was based on highly personal interactions whereas that of the late 1980s was most impersonal and highly specialized.

The average teachers had taught at the school since the early 1970s and maintained very strong personal relationships among themselves. In fact, many of the teachers knew each other since their high school years in the inner city. The students who attended school during the early 1970s were most often their own sons, daughters, and neighbors, since many of the teachers were residents of Metropolitan City at that time.

According to teachers who taught in the system since the early 1970s, the teacher-student relationships at that time was personalized and carried over into the community and their religious and political affairs. Most of the teachers and students were Jewish, attended the same temples, and met regularly at religious and social activities outside of school.

Many of the teachers' sons and daughters graduated from Metropolitan High School and were practicing doctors, lawyers, politicians, and teachers. They discussed their sons and daughters in the teachers' cafeteria and often mentioned the year of their graduation, always with a sense of pride and the sentiment that "those were the days." As I listened to these conversations, I felt that whatever happened in the early 1970s was exciting and intellectually stimulating and the teachers were an intricate, causal factor for that excitement. This scenario contrasted sharply with the tense, impersonal environment of the late 1980s. As the community's racial composition changed, most of the teachers moved to the more affluent suburbs nearby. They commuted daily back to Metropolitan High School to complete their work careers.

The students of the early 1970s were, using Freire's (1989) terminology, like subjects who "knew" their teachers personally and "acted" upon that knowledge. The African American males of the late 1980s, on the other hand, were like objects, "known" and "acted upon" by their teachers and others. The latter group had little input into their schooling and consequently could not influence their education, while the former group had considerable control and influence over their destiny.

A typical expression of this difference in teachers' relationships with their students was expressed by one Caucasian teacher. This teacher had worked in the district for more than twenty-five years:

> First of all, it was population - and it was mainly a White population. And the kids were more motivated...And slowly the population changed...and things just sort of evolved from there....
>
> Well, when I hear a lot of people, unfortunately, they compare how it was then and how the kids are now. And it really is too bad because I do see a difference in test scores. And we still have some real terrific kids but we don't have as many...but I see teachers get upset, really get upset. And I think this is what they want...(pause) they want to retire because it isn't like it used to be.

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The average teacher at Metropolitan was highly experienced. In fact, most teachers at the time of this study had worked at the school for a minimum of 16 years and saw the school change from one of the most outstanding schools in the state to a school which ranked, academically, among the lowest in the state. Yet, the majority of teachers who were hired when the school originally opened or during the decade thereafter, still remained in their positions until well into the 1980s. There were five African American and 70 Caucasian teachers employed at the school. Many were nearing retirement. Of the fourteen new teachers were hired between 1986 and 1988, only one was an African American.

Above all other factors which surfaced throughout this project, none was more pervasive than the issue of teachers as "caring" individuals. The change in the general make-up of the student body over the past twenty years impacted the quality of instruction, but the African American males were most concerned with the fact that many teachers simply did not demonstrate caring.

Teachers, counselors, and other staff, too many to exhibit here, habitually mentioned the "push-out," the forcing of unruly students out of classrooms as a factor which existed in many classes. The message, explicit or implicit, to the students was "either you perform or you don't, I don't care." A few teachers experienced very different types of relationships with their students, especially those in the business department who were attempting to gear their students for the work world after graduation. Several teachers in the that department commented on the wide-spread lack of concern for the students by other teachers. One African American teacher noted that, "the feeling of disinterest seems to increase with each passing year."

The African American males had little respect for those teachers who

could not control their classes or who failed to demand quality work from their students. Many felt that their cultural and ethnic needs were not met, that they learned very little about themselves and their history. For example, there were several Caucasian teachers who became offended when an African American gospel group was invited to Metropolitan High School to join in the celebration of Black History Month. African American male students at Metropolitan High School felt that their teachers were not sensitive to their need for cultural identity and perceived that teachers were offended by the singing of African American gospel and spiritual songs. In contrast, when I researched the quality of academic and social activities which supported the Jewish culture of the students during the early 1970s, I discovered that Jewish culture was reinforced through out the school. For example, in the area of curriculum, the foreign language department offered Hebrew I, II, III and IV; the social studies department offered a course entitled Israel Today; and there were numerous student exchanges between Israeli and Metropolitan students. Even though the student body was 95% non-Jewish, students were prohited from having social activities, proms or graduations on Friday evenings because the fact that the teachers could not attend because of their observance of Jewish Sabboth. Additionally, the school's calendar was built around the Jewish holidays. It appears that their is considerable flexibility within the curriculum and scheduling. Public schools can be designed and redesigned to incorporate cultural and historical information specific to the students being served a given time period. In the case of Metropolitan High School, the curriculum of the early 1970s was conducive to the students enrolled, but the curriculum of the late 1980s was culturally alienating.

My conversation with Lateef, one of Metropolitan's drop-outs,

highlighted the social distancing which existed between the African American males and the teachers at Metropolitan High School.

> Teachers never understood my life...they don't know what's going on out here with us [Black males]. There are many broken families, different from in the 1960s...many students are caught in the middle of fights between the parents, mothers and fathers....I have a single mom who had to work and take care of us.

After leaving high school, Lateef had a successful period of dealing drugs. Lateef was very smart, a B-student when he attended Metropolitan High. He opened his own lawn-care service and placed his younger brother in a job with his company. His goal was to leave the drug world and become an entrepreneur. His girlfriend was pregnant when I saw him in 1989. Tragically, at the young age of 16, he was an established drug dealer, parent to a younger brother, spouse to his girlfriend, and an expectant father, all while living in constant fear of losing his own life.

Another counselor provided me with her thoughts on why so many students were seen in the halls with their teachers' permission. Her comments were also related to the issue of caring:

Polite: I observed one group of students hanging posters which advertised a dance which was planned for the weekend. I asked them why were they hanging posters. They said that Ms. so and so gave them a pass. Can you comment on why this happens?

Counselor: I think it's typical.

Polite: Will you talk more about it?

Counselor: I think that a lot of teachers don't get into their teaching and they're always looking for ways to get rid of some of these students. It's a terrible thing to say, but I feel that they are always trying to get rid of them.

Polite: Is it that they can't handle them or they don't like them or they have problems with them or themselves or...

Counselor: They...just...don't...care ...they just ...don't...care. It's like those teachers who come in everyday and have a book assignment and as long as they sit and be quiet, they could be doing anything. There is not a lot of interaction between the teachers and students here anymore.

I concluded that not all, but far too many teachers demonstrated little or no caring for the African American male participants in this study. Increased social distancing between the teachers and the students was an identifiable factor which contributed to the poor educational outcomes for African American males at Metropolitan High. For many students, the reaction was to stop caring, continue disrupting, and to put forth very little effort in the sphere of academics.

Teachers were not solely to be blamed for poor academic outcomes. Parents shared a major part of the responsibility for their sons' poor education. They could not expect the school to shoulder the complete responsibility for educating these students.

PARENTS AND THE SCHOOL

My research did not focus specifically on the African American parents, but their lack of involvement emerged through out my work. Rarely were these parents seen in the school or at school-related activities, including those meetings sponsored by the parent-teacher organization. The only times that parents were seen in the building were during the two annual parent conferences, one in the fall and one in the spring, and when students -- generally African American males -- were suspended from classes. Less than one quarter of the parents attended the two annual parent conferences. Most African American parents rarely visited and many never visited the school

during their sons' high school careers.

Teachers often commented that the lack of parental input contributed greatly to the lack of interest and motivation on the part of many of the African American students. The teachers viewed the lack of parental involvement as another major difference between the parents of the late 1980s and the parents of the early 1970s. One teacher reflected on the quality of parental

involvement of early 1970s:

> Parents were very much involved. Any project you wanted to do, parents did for you. Everything you needed, they brought. Whatever you said - let's do this, let's do that, everybody got involved and volunteered. If you had a little play in the classroom, they would come and see it. Whatever you did, they were right there behind you.

In the late 1980s, working mothers had less time to be available for school-sponsored activities at the school. Most of these parents deferred the responsibility for insuring the education of their sons to the school. Their understanding of what the school could and would do without parental support and involvement, as two teachers put it, was totally unrealistic:

> Teacher #1: Many of the parents that I see are very tough to call (under stand) and a lot of the times, you see, some parents think that the school should do it all and follow these kids along, which is totally an impossible task. I think the parents at some point are unreasonable in what they think that we can do...

> Teacher #2: Some parents didn't want to come (when called for discipline procedures). Some parents are supportive but they will call up and say, 'Is my kid in school today? How the hell do I know! They have unrealistic expectations of the school and what teachers know and what teachers don't know.

It is important to point out here that a reduction in support staff over the decade of the 1980s greatly hindered parents from receiving the quality of information which was essential for them to be informed. For example, in

early 1970s there were full-time staff persons assigned to keep track of student attendance on a daily basis. These attendance persons were available to parents and contacted parents by telephone when their children were not attending classes.

There were only about 10 African American parents who worked within, but mainly outside of, the school to assure that certain African American males, generally the higher achievers, took the proper courses, were involved and supported in the school's sports programs, were appropriately dressed, and received ample information to make rational decisions about college and summer employment. I questioned one student about his mother's involvement in planning his high school courses. It was clear that his mother and other mothers worked "behind the scenes" to assure that their sons received the best possible education. They did not rely on the school:

Polite: Did your mother know what classes you took?

Naeem: (laugh) Oh she definitely knew!

Polite: Did she check your report card?

Naeem: Yeap!

Polite: All the way through?

Naeem: Definitely!

Polite: Do you think that other Black males had that type of support?

Naeem: No...I'm sure that they don't (laugh, but sadly).

Polite: That makes a difference? I know that was true for TJ and Pele. Did you know their parents?

Naeem: hum...hum. They were very nice and helpful. TJ's mother was always asking me about my schedule. She had all the

> information from when TJ was applying for college last year and taking the entrance tests and stuff, so she gave it to my mom too.

Unfortunately, few African American parents were actively involved in the education of their sons. Sports events, even when the teams were vying for division championships, were poorly attended. Few parents attended honors or sporting programs at the school. Plays and other exhibits were poorly attended by parents. There was a faithful, but small, group of parents who supported everything from the booster clubs to the honors activities.

The lack of African American parental support and involvement contributed significantly to the quality of education available to African American males at Metropolitan High School. Administrators, teachers, concerned parents and students agreed that most African American parents were not involved in the schooling process.

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES - CAREER PLANNING

There was little evidence that African American male students were adequately prepared to make decisions regarding their choices of careers. African American males complained that there were no opportunities for students to meet with a counselor other than to plan class schedules or resolve scheduling conflicts. The counselor concurred that their time allocation was restricted to planning schedules and not career planning. In fact, there were only two career day activities between 1986 and 1988 and they were restricted to a small group of students. Few students expressed knowledge of the job market, except those students who participated in the vocational training programs.

Marvin, one of students, explained what happened to him in his early

years of high school as a result of not having career planning:

> When I came here in the 9th grade, I hung with the older students and in my mind, all I wanted to do was just party And I think that if I would have had more people to talk to me about school to say, "Marvin, if you don't study now, you will have a difficult time in your senior year," I would have kind of tried in the 9th grade year, that's when I started experiencing girls, parties, and just going out a lot, that's what really messed me up.

Many African American males were left to rely on their parents for guidance and direction. As was suggested in the previous section, few parents were committed to providing this type of support. One student, Nassor, explained that he received all of his career planning support from his mother.

In the absence of an organized career development program, the school was not providing much information to African American males regarding career possibilities and the work world. In addition, many African American males remained unaware of the close connection between excellent academic performance and college attendance. As a result, these students often held unrealistic views about their future careers.

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES - TESTING ISSUES

Testing posed a major burden for African American male students who were generally unprepared academically or emotionally. This included the state-administered Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP Test) and college entrance examinations.

One student provided me with a typical testing scenario for African American males at Metropolitan High School:

> Student: ...well, you know those tests that we take called the MEAP test that are given so early in the year when you just gettin' out of summer, and then they be so long too. We were saying in Mrs. Brooks' class when she was asking us why our test scores are so low...and was telling her that it's too early in the year that

> we were just getting back to school and you have to start remembering stuff and you can't remember that quick...They should make it in February or sometime like that so that you could be ready. I know when I took the test, we would be there and there would be a time when you really get tired and bored with reading it, you just mark off the answer and some people just marked off the answers and you know that they are not reading it because they are marking too fast. A lot of people didn't care 'cause the test was too long.

Testing was a source of frustration for all of the college-bound African American males. I observed that several of these males took the college-entrance examination as many as five times, hoping to achieve a score high enough to be accepted into a four-year college, or if accepted, a score high enough to be eligible to play college-level sports. Shakir, for example, had a difficult time with his college entrance testing. He explained it in the following excerpt from a in-depth interview:

Polite: What did you get on the ACT?
Shakir: (long pause)...I don't remember.
Polite: Did you do well?
Shakir: I took it three times. The first time I just barely made it and my mother thought that I could do better than that, so I took it again and it [score] dropped...and then the third time I took it, I scored a little higher than the first time.
Polite: Did you take the SAT too?
Shakir: Yes, I took both of them three times.
Polite: (expressed shock) You took six exams in one year?
Shakir: Yes!
Polite: Why do you think that you had to take them six times?
Shakir: 'Cause I thought that I could do better than that.

Shakir was a B - average student at Metropolitan. There were many cases similar to Shakir's with respect to testing, especially college-entrance examinations.

There was little effort made to inform and prepare African American males for specific career in a systemic manner. Career information was not

made available to these students during their high school experience. In the absence of goals and career plans, many males were not motivated. Many of these students developed negative opinions about the overall potential of their schooling process as a result of comparative insights from a variety of sources.

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES - COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS AND SKEPTICISM

The African American male students I studied were aware of the changes that occurred at Metropolitan High over the years and were skeptical about the quality of education that they received at Metropolitan High. One reason was that their knowledge and experiences with secondary schooling were not limited to those at Metropolitan High School. In fact, these students generally participated in one of two programs which provided them with opportunities to meet, develop friendships, compare insights, and draw conclusions about the quality of education afforded students at other schools. These two programs were a multi-district vocational education program and a tri-district advanced placement program for the academically gifted and talented. The students were bused to these two programs daily. Most students, once enrolled, remained in these programs for two or three years, developing strong relationships and friendships with students from a variety of schools. As an example, when I interviewed Ahmed, he simply explained how he had developed this type of comparative knowledge at the Vocational Center:

Ahmed: ...it seemed that their school was so much better than our school in terms of atmosphere and teaching staff.

Polite: Why would you say that?

Ahmed: There was one student in my voc. class who had an English book...the English that I was taking, he had in the 9th grade...their school was more ahead than Metropolitan High.

Approximately 30% of the total enrollment at Metropolitan High participated in these off-campus programs with students from five affluent suburbs during the 1986-1987 school year. The degree of infiltration of these opinions throughout the school, and especially among African American males, was immeasurable.

Other students compared their experiences at Metropolitan High with their relatives' experiences from other public and private schools. They heard comments from adults in the community and read articles in the area's newspapers regarding the declining quality of education at Metropolitan High School.

Fadil, another student in the class, also attended the vocational center and was far more critical than Ahmed in his perceptions regarding the differences in the quality of education available to students in different schools:

Polite: So you knew kids who went to other schools?

Fadil: I know a lot of kids that go to other schools all over and when you talk to them in class [at the vocational center] and they tell you everything that happens in their school and when you tell them about Metropolitan High, they be like "wow" and they can't believe what happens at Metropolitan, especially about the attitude of some of our teachers.

Polite: what type of things do they say?

Fadil: Like the help that you (they) get from their teachers. They all say that their teachers really care and the principal knows you well. Their principal try to get to know their students. "Cause my counselor didn't even know that I was assigned to her until an incident had came up my senior year and I had to go to her...also I know like the army recruiters told me that Metropolitan...our learning isn't as high as some other schools is. I was telling him what I got on the ACT test and he was like asking what my grade-point average was and he said that it would be different if I was going to some other school, I according to the recruiter) would probably have a D average.

Polite: How did he know that?

Fadil: I guess he had inside information....He said that most people when they look at the news, they see our school at the bottom of the state [Michigan]. He was saying "look at what the state is saying about Metropolitan High." If I was to go to another school, I wouldn't do so well. I said it depends on how much you study and he said that is true, but you kids [at Metropoli tan High] don't really study, you're into selling drugs and stuff.

Polite: Did you know that guy?

Fadil: Yes, he's the army recruiter, Sgt. Smith.

I found an abundance of evidence from my interviews and field notes that led me to conclude that most African American males had negative attitudes about the quality of education available at Metropolitan High School as compared with other nearby suburban schools. Whether their information was accurate or not, they clearly believed it. I believe that this type of knowledge impacts both motivation and interest in schooling. The viewed their education less seriously, having diminished potential as compared with the potential of education in other schools.

This observation corresponds with Willis' (1977) finds with working-class youth. The "lads" in his study also developed pessimistic opinions regarding a plausible egalitarian, educational opportunity for working-class student in England. Like the lads, the African American males studied here indicated in their own words their belief that different schools, representing different socio-economic populations, provide different qualities of education.

I was convinced from my data that this type of comparative knowledge had a negative impact on these students and altered their thinking and enthusiasm about both Metropolitan High School and college, too. They did not attend high school with great hopes of receiving a beneficial education. They knew that their education was not highly regarded outside the Metropolitan High

School community. Many of them also felt that the general public's opinion of their education severely limited their opportunities for higher education.

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES - ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

Only slightly more than half (63 African American males) actually received a diploma as of June, 1990. Two-thirds of those who graduated were academically average or below-average students Eight out of the 115 earned a grade-point average of C+ or better and only 4 graduated with honors. Table 2 provides a description of other academic and social outcomes of these 115 African American males.

It was clear that not more than 1 out of 15 African American males was actually prepared for college-level work. Consequently, many of the college-bound students had a difficult time getting admitted into four-year colleges and universities. Major colleges and universities commonly required all applicants to take either the ACT or SAT college entrance examination and submit their test scores as a prerequisite for admission. Yet, only 17 of the 60 African American males who graduated from Metropolitan High School's class of 1989 took the ACT examination[3]. Moreover, no African American male scored within the highest interval and only three scored within the upper-middle interval[4].

Table 2 Demographic Description of the 115 African American Males

N = 115	
Factor	number of incidents
Graduated with class/June, 1989	60
Graduated late	3
Graduated below average (2.00 or C)	39
Graduated above average (2.75 or B-)	8
Graduated with honors (3.0 or better)	4
Took ACT college entrance examination	17
Scored 16 or higher*	4
Dropped for non-attendance	28
Expelled by the Board of Education	8
Moved out of school district	8
GED adult education	4
Killed	3
Unknown	1
Total	115
Additional Factors	number of known incidents
Shot by gunfire	3
Incarcerated between Sept. 1986 - June, 1990	23

*Note. A score of 15 or higher is considered acceptable for some colleges and sports programs.

Eight African American males had plans to play college-level sports as a means of financing their college education, but because of their poor scores on the college entrance examinations they were not eligible by the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) "Proposition 48," which requires a minimum composite score of 15 on the ACT for eligibility. At Metropolitan High School only 4 out of the 115 met this minimum requirement to play sports at major institutions their freshman year.

I interviewed five African American males who entered college to determine what their first year's experiences were like and whether or not they felt academically prepared. Akil was accepted at several major institutions, including the University of Michigan and Michigan State University. He opted to attend a small, historically African American university in the state of Florida known for its business programs. I questioned him during the summer following his first year of college. I inquired about his readiness for college. It appeared that college was not as dreadful an experience for him as was the case with several others of his African American male classmates. He had achieved a 3.50 grade point average for the first year of college and was excited about returning to college in the fall, 1990.

Tsoka, another graduate who earned a 2.91 grade point average at Metropolitan High and scored within the lowest interval on the ACT examination (12), was reportedly doing well at a small four-year college in Michigan. His mother reported that he was required to take several remedial courses during the first semester and began his regular courses during the second semester. His overall grade-point average for the first year of college was 3.2 on a 4.0 point scale.

Six African American male graduates complained that they had not received

adequate information needed to make rational decisions regarding their college choice. Naeem, for example, was an above-average student at Metropolitan High and attended Utah Valley College in the state of Utah. He planned to major in legal assistance and hoped eventually to become a lawyer. He had a very negative experience at college during his freshman year. His academic performance was slightly above average, earning a 2.8 on a 4.0-point grading scale. He complained to me, however, that there was tremendous pressure placed on him and other African American students to convert to Mormonism. He felt that if he had received more information from his high school teachers and counselors, he would never have attended Utah Valley.

Pili, as well, had a distressing first-year college experience. His grade-point average was 1.70 on a 4.0 scale at a small African American college in Virginia. He felt that he was totally unprepared for college. He claimed that his study habits were not properly developed at Metropolitan High School and that the lack of on-going academic challenges in high school severely hindered his development and readiness for college. Pili was considered a good student at Metropolitan High School with the fourth highest grade-point average (3.2) of the 115 African American males at Metropolitan High School.

Pili, Akil, Naeem and Tsoka were above-average high school students and were expected to do well in college. Other students like Salim were average academically, but somewhat interested in personal development. Salim attended an urban university as a part-time student for the first semester following graduation and dropped out of college during the second semester. When I asked him about his experiences in college during a follow-up interview, he reported that he had passed two classes but had received incomplete grades in

two other classes. He remarked, "In high school, I figured that I was smart and if I did the work, I would be a show-off....I wanted to fit in with the crowd." Salim did not plan to not return to the university in the fall of 1990, but rather hoped to attend a small Bible college to major in pastoral counseling. His two older brothers also attended Metropolitan High School, but dropped out to sell drugs. Salim felt that his mother's support and his determination not to make the same mistakes as his brothers were the only two factors which prevented him from becoming involved in similar circumstances.

Finally, Nassor was an example of the underemployed African American male graduate. Nassor, like most of the African American males in his class, graduated with a below-average academic record. He earned a 1.3 grade point average and scored 05 on the ACT examination. He was not accepted at any four-year college or university and was eligible only for the open admission schools and junior colleges. He opted to work rather than attend a junior college.

I observed Nassor for more than three months following graduation prior to asking for a follow-up interview. I interviewed him at the restaurant where he was employed as a bus boy. He complained that he felt embarrassed every time I came into the restaurant because he had not gotten himself accepted into college and was working in a "low paying job." He mentioned that he planned to attend a junior college in the fall of 1990, but he had not obtained an application or visited a junior college as of July, 1990. He confirmed that he had "expected more out of life." I asked him what were his complaints, and he replied, "I'm tired of depending on my parents and I only make $4.35 per hour: I'm dirty at the end of everyday."

Thus, for those African American males who graduated, it appeared that

widespread underemployment or unemployment was their plight. In fact, most of the 63 African American male graduates did not attend college, and among those who did attend, few had successful first-year experiences.

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES - PEER PRESSURE AND MATERIALISM

Aside from the lack of caring on the part of some teachers, peer pressure seemed to be the most prominent factor leading to poor academic performance for African American males at Metropolitan High School, especially for the poorer African American male. Peer pressure accounted for much of the preoccupation with activities which isolated African American males from the benefits of schooling. Many students were consumed by the need to dress in certain fashions, while others refrained from attending certain classes and school in general for fear of name-calling and ridicule because of their style of clothing. In efforts to procure the clothing, valued at as much as $500 per outfit, many students were drawn into drug trafficking, a lucrative alternative to underemployment and unemployment. A later section in this paper will discuss the details of the drug subculture at Metropolitan High, while this section will provide some evidence of the impact of peer pressure at Metropolitan High School on African American males.

I often visited nearby businesses and shopping malls during school hours and discovered large numbers of Metropolitan African American male students. These students were commonly dropped-off for school by their parents. They entered the front door of the school and walked out the back door with their friends. Often, these students went to the more exorbitant shopping malls to purchase their daily outfits valued at between $250 and $500. Storekeepers provided stories of regular customers who attended Metropolitan High and spent

hundreds of dollars shopping each week.

On one occasion, an African American male went to the mall during the school morning and purchased a new pair of designer gym shoes priced at $250. He returned to school and showed them and the bag in which they came to several other African American males during an exchange of classes. He left his shoes in his locker. He returned to his locker at lunch to find it vandalized and his shoes stolen. He became outraged and ran through the building, yelling that he was going to "kill the mother f...who took my shoes, and I will know because I'm the only one with a pair like them in this mother f...school." He left the school at lunch and purchased a second pair of shoes at the same price. When he returned that afternoon with a second pair of shoes, he was the talk and wonderment of his friends. Later in the school year, he was arrested for attempting to sell $10,000 worth of cocaine to a drug enforcement agent.

There were numerous incidents where students felt compelled to participate in gang fights in support of their neighborhood or friends. If one influential student was suspended from school, other friends would attempt to get themselves suspended, or they simply did not attend classes so that they could be with their friend. On one occasion, a student gave me a personal note which read, "Mr. Polite, you know all those kids who are rollin' (selling drugs) always talk about me and the way I dress. So sometimes I don't feel like hearing it and I just cut class." I questioned the student and he explained that the reason he did not attend many classes was because his parents were unable to provide him with the high-fashioned clothing worn by so many of the other popular African American males. He later began selling drugs before dropping out of school.

Hare (1985), a African American sociologist, explained the negative impact of peer pressure on African American males, especially those from single-parent households headed by the mother, as was the case with the majority of the 115 students in this study:

> The peer group sets the standards and perimeter of their behavior. It builds disdain and contempt for the values and advice of the parents. In the absence of the father and his relentless model for the boy, with no one of authority and forcefulness to back up the mother's decrees, the boy is all the more easily instigated to oppose his mother's authority. In the best of circumstances, half of the parental force is missing (p. 17).

The effect of peer pressure often resulted in aggressive, violent, and criminal behaviors. Many African American males at Metropolitan High School were shot, paralyzed, or incarcerated, and three were killed during the time that this study was conducted. Most expulsions were based on behavioral incidents related to negative peer pressure. Knowledge of these events was commonly discussed among the students, teachers, administrators, and parents.

I asked one of the African American male security guards who had worked in the school for more than a decade and coached a number of sports, what were some of the reasons so many students were in school, but not attending classes? He responded:

> Family problems...stability...one kid that I know, for example, is not in class and he walks the halls...it might seem trivial, but he sees kids with things that he can't have (afford), so he says that he wants them and he walks the halls because he doesn't want to go to class and be ashamed.

Materialism and consumerism, two prerequisites for a strong capitalist society, very clearly worked their way down to working-class African American males at Metropolitan High and were reflected in the focus of

the peer pressure among the students. Hare concluded that materialism prevents rather than promotes success for many African American males (Pete, 1986).

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES - DRUG SUBCULTURE

I have described elsewhere, in detail, the role of the impact of the school's drug culture on African American males (Polite, 1987). African American male dealers or "rollers" as they were called at Metropolitan High, were approximately thirty (30) in number. However, a much larger number of African American males associated with these rollers, because the rollers provided them with rides in their cars and drugs. This small core of thirty was actually responsible for most of the drug distribution or rollin' carried out within the school.

Recruitment of new members was on-going. The new members were recruited by older members, and there was a constant flow and change in membership. Many of the African American males who dropped out of school operated "dope houses" (a house in the community where drugs are sold twenty-four hours a day), a smaller number stayed in school and somehow managed to graduate.

I interviewed several rollers to inquire how might teenagers get involved in rollin' or selling drugs. The responses were consistent: by recruitment by older, seasoned members, or by volunteering. Some African American males gave accounts of older students or adults in the community who took young boys "shopping" and purchased material items ranging from clothing to motor bikes, depending on how badly these new recruits were needed to maintain the distribution of the drugs in the community and nearby suburbs. Generally, clothing seemed to be a very high priority and a major attraction which

seduced young African American males into the drug culture at Metropolitan High. Once a member or roller, jewelry, cars, and travel became important goals of the roller. One student informed me that:

> Once a young "dude" gets tired of not having the amount or type of clothing he wants, he merely has to walk up to an older known roller and say "put me down" or "put me on the payroll" or simply--"word" and the older roller will get the younger dude started by providing him with a small amount of drugs to sell. If the novice proves dependable, he can become a serious roller with his own clientele and "partnerships."

Generally, the rollers operated in small groups of two or three "rollers" referred to as "partnerships." Within the partnership, each member was responsible for contributing an equal amount of "start-up" money. The start-up money was used to purchase a small quantity of drugs, usually marijuana because it was the cheapest drug on the street market. Then the process known as "flippin" began whereby all or most of the profits from the drug dealings were used to purchase larger quantities of drugs. This process continued within a particular category of drugs until the partners had saved enough money to afford to move into a higher category and so on until they reached the "coke" or cocaine level where the greatest profits were to be made.

Each member of the partnership checked and balanced the others. Should one member be dishonest, some very serious sanctions were generally imposed. These sanctions included isolation from the partnership, beatings, and sometimes, extremely violent attacks and shootings. Most African American male rollers interviewed responded that the reason they became involved in drug dealing was because they wanted things which their parents could not afford to buy for them. Rollin' was easy money and the profit came quickly with little effort. Each informant interviewed reminded me that it was absolutely essential that neither his identity be disclosed nor the identities

of other persons involved in the drug dealings of the school for fear of bodily injury or even death. Most of the students interviewed were close associates of one another and apparently none mentioned the fact that they were interviewed by me, or that they had provided me with information concerning the workings of the drug subculture within the school.

Sefu was known by all the African American males as a good student and outstanding basketball player. Several student informants suggested that I interview him regarding his rollin' experiences. I contacted Sefu. He refused to come in for an interview, but did agree to talk with me over the telephone. Sefu told me that he was ashamed to return to school because everyone knew

that he was a big man in the drug world. He assured me that he discouraged other African American males from becoming involved with drugs and hoped to get out of the trafficking as soon as he could. Several students told me that Sefu purchased several condominiums with the profits from rollin' and that his parents were living in one of these properties. Sefu was driving a 1989 Mercedes Benz when he was arrested by the police with cocaine valued at $20,000.

One young roller was very depressed as he discussed his involvement with drugs, stating that his mother could barely provide him with the necessities of life. He was only sixteen years old. His question for me was, "Do you want me to fry hamburgers and clean out McDonald's bathrooms for minimum wages, when I can make one 'thou' (a thousand dollars) a week?" He and several of his friends took a weekend trip to Las Vegas to attend a professional boxing match and upon their return were admired by other African American males at school.

These young rollers were well aware of the ill effects of drugs on their bodies and generally never consumed their own products. Several rollers referred to those dealers, who also used drugs, as "junkies" and "dope heads." They viewed rollin' as strictly a means to acquire a large some of money with minimum effort. Given the rate of joblessness among young African American males in Michigan, drug dealing became especially attractive. Those rollers who also abused drugs were considered deviant and "weak" among their peers because this deviant group sold not for a profit, but to support their own addiction.

Bilal was an example of how the drug subculture could affect any African American male student at Metropolitan High School or in typical urban communities. Bilal was an average student. He knew a number of the rollers but never sold drugs himself. During the first semester of the 1989-1990 school year, he was shot in the chest just slightly to the right of his heart. From all accounts, he was merely attending a party and several rollers were also in attendance at the same party. During the party, Bilal got into an argument with one of the rollers over regarding his clothing and girlfriend. The roller shot Bilal. He was hospitalized for more than a month. Upon returning to school, he was extremely withdrawn and isolated himself from all of his friends. Bilal graduated, but his grades had fallen below the average mark. He had no plans for future schooling or employment.

Nothing posed a greater menace to the normal functioning of Metropolitan High School than the drug subculture of the school. Drugs impacted African American male students' interest in schooling, led to an obsession with materialism, and resulted in many African American males failing to graduate from high school, incarceration, and even death.

Based on these characteristics, I concluded that many of the rollers also suffered from poor self-image esteem. As was mentioned, two communities made up the Metropolitan School District. The average African American parent in Metropolitan City could provide expensive designer clothing, motor bikes, and cars for their children, while such items were generally far beyond the reach of most parents residing in the Township. One theory which emerged was that poor students who suffered from poor self-image were more likely to turn to drug dealing than poor students who had a positive self-image.

CONCLUSION

This paper described some of the important experiences of the 115 African American males in the class of 1989 at Metropolitan High School. I began with a discussion of the demographic transition at Metropolitan High School, a change from one serving a primarily Jewish, middle-class population to a school serving a predominantly African American, working-class and lower-class populations. I explored the consequences of this change relative to the quality of educational outcomes for African American males, e.g. as the racial composition of Metropolitan High School changed from predominantly Jewish and middle-class to predominantly African American and working-class, the quality of the educational outcomes - especially for African American males - declined drastically. Only slightly more than half of the original 115 students actually graduated with their class, and among those who completed their schooling, most were significantly below-average academically and thus less likely to apply to or be accepted into four-year colleges. Nearly one third of the 115 were drop outs or expelled from school. With these outcomes, I had no recourse except to conclude that the school's mission

to provide a quality education to all students through effective teaching in a caring environment was not met.

Relationships between teachers and students, which in the 1960s and early 1970s were characterized by "caring informality", were in the late 1980s characterized by "high formality", much social distance, and a lack of close attention to career counseling and student attendance. Similarly, the close relationships among parents and the school, which typified Metropolitan High through out much of the 1960s and early 1970s, were lost in the 1980s as working-class African American parents, mostly single working mothers, became increasingly detached from the life of the school. As a result, the peer culture of the teenagers in the school assumed ascendency in the socialization of African American male students, and to a large extent, this culture was in opposition to the central values of the school system. Among the African American male students of the class of 1989, a drug culture emerged as the single-most detrimental factor which impacted the education of many African American males at Metropolitan High Schooling the school.

I have argued elsewhere (Polite, 1991) that these outcomes are consistent with reproduction theory with its strong correspondence between the social class make-up of the school and educational outcomes of the students e.g. when the school served middle and upper-middle class students, the majority of the students who attended graduated, attended the better colleges, and eventually assumed middle-class position within society's division of labor. As the social class composition of the school changed, so did the nature of the school environment and academic outcomes experienced by the 115 African American male students I studied. The school became more formal and oriented to order and discipline, while the academic outcomes of the students

were such that most of the students left unprepared for the demands of college and university work and ill-prepared for the post-industrial work world in Michigan. As a result, education -- a major route out of the working and lower-class situation in which these students found themselves -- was closed off to most of the African American male students at Metropolitan High School.

Yet, this paper also demonstrates that human agency or the potential of individual to control or impact their own destiny was important to the story of Metropolitan High School and to the outcomes of the 115 African American male students. The data in this paper shows that the story of Metropolitan High School is about the variable accommodation of teachers, parents, and students to the social situation in school. Many teachers at Metropolitan High chose to distance themselves from the students they served, in part because of teachers' life circumstances. And many parents likewise were led by life circumstances to distance themselves from the school. But other teachers and parents did not follow this pattern. Similarly, the data examined demonstrated that students developed different patterns of response to the school environment. Some engaged in the kinds of oppositional behaviors noted by resistance theorists, but there were other accommodations to schooling as well.

How can this cycle of miseducation be broken at Metropolitan High School and other similar schooling situations? Since the mid-1980s when this work was begun, Metropolitan High School is now into its fifth year of school improvement activities under the direction its principal. Numerous curriculum and social changes have occurred. Special attention has been provided to incoming 9th graders, insuring that they are provided sufficient information needed to between their high school careers. Career planning has become

central to the role of the counseling staff. Incidents of violence and crime within the school have diminished and school and community have begun addressing special needs of African American male students. Issues related to cultural and racial differences between the teachers and students are now part of a new discourse within the school.

The school system has undergone significant changes as well. An African American was recently appointed by the Board of Education to serve as Superintendent of Schools. Although he is only into his first year of service, there has been a tremendous amount of excitement and support demonstrated for his school improvement efforts. He has demonstrated the ability to bring the total school community together to work for the improvement of educational outcomes for the predominantly African American student population.

Given the similarities between the outcomes of these students and other African American males in this country[5], it is hoped that this discussion will lend some insight into the undereducation of African American males.

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ENDNOTES

1. Five (5) African American males in the class of 1989, the subjects of this work; the Superintendent of Schools in Metropolitan City, an orthodox Jew; the Associate Superintendent, a non-Jewish Caucasian; the principal of Metropolitan High School, a non-Jewish Caucasian; two(2) members of the Board of education, one orthodox Jew and one non-Jewish Caucasian; the Area Council President of the Parent Teacher Association, an African American woman; and (5) tenured teachers, all Jewish.

2. The students participants were assigned African (Chuks-orji, 1972) and other names typically given African American males in the United States.

3. Most college-bound students throughout the Mid-Western states traditionally took the ACT examination while the SAT is generally taken by those students residing in the Northeastern section of the country (Farrant, 1990).

4. The American College Testing Program, as reported by Farrant (1990), aggregate the ACT composite scores in four intervals:

26 - 36	highest interval
21 - 25	upper-middle interval
16 - 20	lower-middle interval
1 - 15	lowest interval

5. For example of these findings see Foster, 1987; Miller, 1986; Phelan, 1987; Raffe, 1986; Slater, 1974; Trotter, 1981; and Woodson, 1978.